

THE  
CARTER CENTER



**Voices Beyond the Battlefield:  
Sudanese Civic Actors in Wartime and Diaspora**

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## Terms and Abbreviations

ACHPR	African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights
CAT	Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment or Punishment
CED	Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance
CERD	International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRC-OP-AC	Optional Protocol on the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CSOs	Civil society organizations
HAC	Humanitarian Aid Commission
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
IDPs	Internally displaced persons
IRC	International Rescue Committee
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders)
NED	National Endowment for Democracy
NGOs	Nongovernmental organizations
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SARHO	Sudanese Agency for Relief and Humanitarian Operations
U.N.	United Nations

## Executive Summary

### *Context*

Since the outbreak of war between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces on April 15, 2023, Sudan has seen a catastrophic collapse of the state, including its institutions, public services, and security structures. Two years into the conflict, reports from the U.N. and human rights groups have documented the displacement of 14.5 million Sudanese, famine in some regions, the loss of countless lives, and widespread human rights violations, including mass killings, sexual violence, and forced displacement. Many of these human rights violations have amounted to war crimes and crimes against humanity.<sup>1</sup> Sudan's already fragile social fabric has been severely fractured by ethnically, religiously, and politically charged armed mobilization and militarization of communities, targeted violence, and hate speech, deepening divisions across the country.

Most state institutions have ceased to function, while subnational governance structures have collapsed across large parts of the country. The delivery of public services, which has been historically limited, uneven, and often politicized, has either significantly deteriorated or disappeared altogether. Food insecurity has become both widespread and acute, with the United Nations officially declaring famine in several regions as of August 2024. Agricultural production has been severely disrupted by ongoing conflict, and warring parties have weaponized hunger by deliberately obstructing access to food as a tactic of war. The International Rescue Committee designated Sudan “the largest humanitarian crisis ever recorded.”<sup>2</sup> Other organizations such as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Médecins Sans Frontières, and the International Committee of the Red Cross have similarly described the situation as one of the most severe humanitarian emergencies globally.<sup>3</sup>

In this landscape, Sudanese civic actors, both within Sudan and across the diaspora, have stepped in to meet many of the most urgent needs — organizing aid delivery, evacuating civilians, supporting survivors, providing basic services, and documenting human rights abuses. Despite limited resources, they have mobilized quickly and creatively, often risking their safety to respond where formal institutions have collapsed. Civic actors remain deeply engaged, including those in the diaspora, supporting asylum seekers and displaced communities, coordinating cross-border relief efforts, and helping to sustain grassroots networks that continue to operate within Sudan. Their work is essential for the survival of millions of Sudanese and lays the groundwork for a future rooted in the demands of the country's 2019 revolution — freedom, peace, and justice.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/09/sudan-un-fact-finding-mission-outlines-extensive-human-rights-violations>

<sup>2</sup> International Rescue Committee. (2024, December 11). *Sudan War Sparks 'Biggest Humanitarian Crisis Ever Recorded'*.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2024, December 11). *Sudan: Humanitarian Response Plan 2025*; Médecins Sans Frontières. (2024, December 11). *Sudan: MSF Responds to Humanitarian Crisis*; International Committee of the Red Cross. (2024, December 11). *Sudan: ICRC's Humanitarian Efforts*.

Rather than being supported by both state and non-state armed actors, which claim authority over territories and populations, civil society actors report being treated with suspicion and often deliberately targeted for arrest, torture, and killing, hindering their ability to carry out lifesaving work. These actions are in clear violation of obligations under international law and international humanitarian law that Sudan is party to, including prohibitions on targeting civilians, obstructing humanitarian aid, and using starvation as a method of warfare.<sup>4</sup> In the diaspora, displaced Sudanese struggle with tenuous legal status, limited employment opportunities, and barriers to registering their organizations in host countries. These factors constrain funding opportunities and cause undue emotional and financial strain on activists.

According to Sudanese analysts and activists, the international response to Sudan's conflict and humanitarian catastrophe has been wholly inadequate. Poor financing and coordination are often misaligned with needs on the ground, and warring parties have captured humanitarian assistance, distributing it along polarized tribal, racial, and political lines.<sup>5</sup> There is a growing concern that the war in Sudan is viewed increasingly as a prolonged crisis rather than treated with the urgency it demands. This shift risks normalizing the conflict, especially as armed actors and their external benefactors become more entrenched, seeking to influence the post-conflict landscape or profit from ongoing instability. While it is necessary to adapt humanitarian responses to the changing situation, a decline in international political involvement and weak accountability systems risk reinforcing the current situation. These conditions benefit those who view the prospect of a negotiated peace as a threat to their ambitions to control post-conflict Sudan, as well as actors enjoying handsome economic dividends from the ongoing state of chaos. Continued international support is crucial, not only to meet pressing humanitarian needs but also to contribute to stopping the war, sustaining diplomatic efforts, protecting civilians and working toward a fair and lasting solution.

Despite the soaring humanitarian needs, aid remains severely underfunded. The suspension of U.S. assistance, which is by far the largest single humanitarian contribution, amounting to over US\$1.4 billion since October 2022, has deepened this gap. Civic actors working on democracy, governance, and human rights have been marginalized as government donors

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<sup>4</sup> These include the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Convention for the Protection of all persons from Enforced Disappearance (CED), International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Optional Protocol on the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (CRC-OP-AC) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Regionally, Sudan has ratified the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), the African Charter and Welfare of the Child and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Establishment of an African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights. These human rights instruments also contain provisions that protect and promote the rights of civic actors.

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2024, December 24). Famine Spreads in Sudan as Warring Parties Willfully Obstruct Aid; Al Jazeera. (2023, June 16). As Sudan War Rages, Rival Sides Accused of Looting, Diverting Aid; El País. (2024, April 15). Warring Sides in Sudan Have Weaponized Humanitarian Aid.

feel compelled to prioritize emergency relief. Without lasting international support for the protection and expansion of civic space, participatory governance mechanisms, and justice and accountability, Sudan risks the prospect of again ignoring the root causes of its history of conflict, inadequately addressing them, and leaving them unresolved, setting the scene for continued humanitarian emergencies and regional instability. While needs vary by context, a consistent theme emerged among civic actors working in and on Sudan: They operate under extraordinary circumstances and need space, safety, and coordinated, targeted support to do so.

### ***Objective and Scope of the Study***

This report draws on nearly 60 interviews with Sudanese civic actors operating in Sudan and five countries across the region — Uganda, Kenya, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Chad. Through in-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups, The Carter Center aimed to understand the experiences of civil society under extreme pressure, the adaptive strategies employed, the conditions under which actors might safely return and reengage in civic life, and the forms of support necessary to sustain their work.

To ensure comprehensive coverage and detailed insight, the Carter Center’s international expert team employed a qualitative, semi-structured interview methodology, encompassing both individual and group discussions. Participants were selected based on their active involvement in civic life. They represented a diverse range of initiatives, including women-led organizations, youth networks, legal aid providers, grassroots volunteer groups, and emergency response mechanisms.

This report aims to provide firsthand insights into the context and challenges those local actors face in their response to Sudan’s comprehensive conflict. It seeks to elevate the experiences and reflections of Sudanese activists, promote the meaningful inclusion of local actors in humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding interventions, map the dynamics key to international responses to the conflict, and provide actionable recommendations to global policymakers, humanitarian actors, and the broader international community for a coordinated and inclusive response.

### ***Key Findings***

**Operating in Sudan’s conflict context has required flexibility and creativity from civic actors, who continue to adapt.** Voluntarism in Sudan has not only endured the pressure of war, but it has also intensified, reaching exceptional levels. This is not simply altruism in ordinary times; it is a powerful manifestation of wartime social solidarity. Amid immense hardship and danger, Sudanese communities are driven by a deep-rooted culture of mutual aid and civic responsibility, turning survival into a collective effort.

With the collapse of much of the civic space inside Sudan, civic actors — including NGOs, civil society organizations, community groups, and emergency response rooms — have developed pragmatic, strategic, and often ingenious methods of continuing their work. They have adapted by shifting focus and localizing their operations because of the collapse of centralized systems. They have pursued flexible and innovative programming, operating under the umbrella of other organizations, working informally, relying on encrypted

communication. Most organizations have found that they must maintain relationships with the side of the war controlling the areas in which they are working. Working on both sides of the line is rare, given the pressures to show fealty to either the SAF or the RSF, but it does quietly continue. They do so by activating local networks and maintaining working communication channels with warring parties in the areas where they operate to assure ongoing access to target communities. Many continue their work discreetly, operating under the radar or through other local actors. They remain committed to their communities, even at personal risk.

**Most organizations reported that their offices had been destroyed or looted early in the war.** Teams have been displaced and dispersed, and access to many mandated areas of operation — in both RSF- and SAF-controlled areas — has been restricted due to ongoing violence or threats. Civic actors across the country continue to face significant and severe constraints to their operations; ethnic, tribal, and political targeting; and physical danger. Many of them operate without protection, recognition, or pay. Arbitrary arrests, detentions, and even executions of civil society actors have been reported in Sudan.<sup>6</sup> This is in direct violation of international law instruments that Sudan is party to, including the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which prohibits torture and other forms of ill-treatment. Additionally, Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions stipulates that persons detained must be treated humanely in all circumstances, without any adverse distinction. It also provides for fair trials, affording all essential judicial guarantees. These conditions are lacking in the current Sudanese context for civic actors,

**Civic actors in the diaspora often operate in a state of legal and operational ambiguity.** In the diaspora, civic actors face compounding challenges: legal ambiguity around their status, difficulty registering organizations with host governments, varied access to funding opportunities, restrictions on organizational activities, and detachment from direct contact with communities they serve inside Sudan. Many continue to do what they can to support Sudanese communities both inside and outside of Sudan, despite the prevailing emotional, security, legal, operational, and financial challenges.

**Civic actors in the diaspora are interested in returning to Sudan if they can ensure their security and ability to operate.** Nearly all respondents in the diaspora expressed a strong desire to return to Sudan and expressed interest in doing so if certain conditions are met to ensure their safety and safeguard their rights to participate in civic and community life. These include a ceasefire, civilian inclusion in the political process, demilitarization of public space, and the partial restoration of services. Many do not expect ideal conditions but cannot return safely and conduct their work in Sudan amid the existing threats. These minimum conditions can lay the foundation to work toward a political and public environment that values and encourages civic contribution.

**Civic actors showed a strong commitment to defending Sudanese civic space:** Despite deep security, funding, resource, and capacity challenges, Sudanese civic actors in Sudan and the region have demonstrated resilience, creativity, and dedication to community

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<sup>6</sup> <https://redress.org/news/civilians-arbitrarily-detained-tortured-in-sudan/>



welfare and its central role in responding to Sudan's vast emergency. These actors are defending the rapidly shrinking civic space and stepping in to fill critical gaps in service delivery, community mobilization and protection, among other things. Their role is central to Sudan's present and future.

**Sustained, coordinated international support rooted in local ownership is crucial:** All respondents recognized the importance of international support, but many voiced frustration with how it is currently provided. Civic actors pointed out issues such as poor coordination, fragmented and short-term responses, limited resources, rigid funding procedures, and an overemphasis on emergency relief at the expense of long-term needs like protection for vulnerable populations, governance reform, peacebuilding, education, sustainable livelihoods, and community resilience. They stressed that for international aid to be truly effective, it should be long-term, predictable, and better coordinated, and firmly grounded in local perspectives and priorities. Externally imposed solutions should consider and mitigate one's lived experience to empower local agency, build legitimacy, and create sustainable outcomes.

**A dual-track approach is essential for lasting impact in Sudan.** Respondents widely agreed and emphasized that while humanitarian assistance remains critical for the immediate survival of vulnerable populations, it cannot, by itself, establish sustainable peace in Sudan. Without simultaneous investments in civil society, community-led initiatives, and long-term rights-based infrastructure, humanitarian efforts risk merely addressing symptoms rather than root causes. This two-pronged strategy — meeting urgent needs while building civic resilience — is encouraged as the most effective path toward a just and stable future.

### ***Key Recommendations***

Civic actors have offered recommendations aimed at improving the responsiveness, credibility, and impact of engagement with international partners, Sudanese stakeholders, and affected populations. These include ensuring the meaningful inclusion of civil society in political and peace processes, providing flexible, multiyear funding that reaches smaller, localized organizations, strengthening protection mechanisms, supporting psychosocial well-being and resilience, and shifting donor approaches toward more participatory, locally led models of engagement. Without such targeted and sustained measures, the risk of a complete collapse of civic space in Sudan remains high. However, with the right investment, Sudanese civil society can continue to play a pivotal role in humanitarian relief, recovery, and the long-term pursuit of a peaceful and democratic future.

These recommendations are detailed further in the report:

- **Include and protect civic actors.** Ensure meaningful, nonpartisan participation of civilians — especially women, youth, displaced populations, and conflict victims — in all political and peace processes. Strengthen protection mechanisms to enable civic actors to operate safely without fear of targeting or violence. Civilian inclusion must be a non-negotiable condition for negotiations.
- **Consider sustained, flexible funding.** Address critical funding gaps with reliable, multiyear support focused on small, midsized, informal, localized, and diaspora

organizations. Funding should be adaptable to allow rapid responses to changing conflict dynamics and cover essential operational costs.

- **Adopt a dual approach:** immediate aid and long-term recovery. Combine emergency humanitarian relief with investments in governance, human rights, peacebuilding, and the restoration of essential services and infrastructure (health, education, water, economic systems) to promote dignity, reduce aid dependency, and support sustainable recovery.
- **Co-create and expand capacity-building.** Collaborate with local actors to design training on psychosocial support, security, financial management, documentation, and coordination. Broaden access beyond traditional recipients to include emerging, youth-led, women-led, regional, and informal networks.
- **Address mental health and psychosocial needs.** Integrate culturally appropriate psychosocial support into all programming to prevent burnout among civic actors and frontline workers, ensuring organizational sustainability.
- **Shift to bottom-up, locally led approaches.** Base donor strategies on local needs assessments, reduce procedural barriers, engage trusted local intermediaries, and comprehensively map civil society to support diverse and locally trusted groups. Distribute smaller grants to foster inclusivity and equitable opportunity.
- **Streamline donor coordination and accountability.** Simplify grant processes, improve coordination among international donors, and adopt flexible funding models (e.g., Pact, NED, AWDF, Mama Cash). Require joint planning with local partners and co-designed monitoring mechanisms to enhance transparency and local ownership.
- **Bridge divides and support coalition-building.** Facilitate inclusive dialogue among diverse civilian groups to reduce fragmentation, promote unity, and build a shared minimum agenda for peace and transition. Elevate grassroots civil society as equal partners, leveraging their extensive local knowledge.

## The Carter Center in Sudan

The Carter Center has played a sustained role in support of peacebuilding in Sudan since 1989. The Center contributed to efforts to end Sudan's second civil war, observed the 2010 national elections and South Sudan's 2011 referendum for self-determination, supported grassroots conflict resolution, and helped broker key international agreements. Notable achievements include the 1995 "Guinea Worm Ceasefire," which enabled health workers to access previously unreachable conflict zones, and the 1999 Nairobi Agreement, which restored diplomatic ties between Sudan and Uganda and committed both countries to halt support for cross-border rebel groups.

Building on this longstanding engagement, the Center remains committed to working alongside Sudanese communities and all stakeholders to promote peace, protect human rights, and support inclusive governance. The outbreak of war in 2023 has deeply disrupted civic space and the ability of local advocates to operate, communicate, and mobilize. These shifts have not been systematically studied. This report aims to fill that gap by documenting how civic actors are adapting to a fluid environment and assessing how the international community can make impactful efforts to support Sudanese responses to the conflict. As such, it outlines the following objectives:

1. **Amplify Sudanese perspectives:** To channel the experiences, priorities, and recommendations of Sudanese civic actors to international stakeholders, promoting conflict-sensitive, cohesive, and inclusive responses to the conflict that are grounded in local realities.
2. **Highlight the needs of local actors:** To underscore the value and imperative of supporting Sudanese civic actors at the very heart of all humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding interventions.
3. **Document the impact of civic actors and the critical challenges to their continued operation:** To document the critical roles of civic actors amid the conflict, the significant challenges they face, including threats, displacement, and resource constraints, and their strategies and lessons learned to adapt and sustain their work.
4. **Inform an effective international response and support accountable and contextualized interventions:** To provide international stakeholders involved in shaping the response to Sudan's crisis with timely, evidence-based insights into the evolving context for the Sudanese civic response to the country's most acute crisis; to convey informed, responsive, and locally led approaches by centering Sudanese perspectives and ensuring that international action is led by or responds to community-identified needs and priorities.

This report is the first in a series of four focusing on Sudanese civic actors. The Carter Center's second thematic report will build on this foundation by turning to the future and examining how Sudanese civic actors can reorganize and play a role in supporting local governance efforts and shaping the path forward for civic life in Sudan. Together, these reports aim to inform practical support and renewed international engagement with Sudan's civic landscape — one that continues to hold the line, even in the absence of peace.

## Background and Context

More than two years have passed since the outbreak in April 2023 of Sudan's war between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces and the belligerents' affiliated groups. According to the U.N., nearly 13 million people have been displaced, with almost 4 million fleeing to neighboring countries, including Egypt, South Sudan, Chad, Libya, Ethiopia, the Central African Republic, and beyond to Uganda.<sup>7</sup> It has devastated lives and destroyed already fragile infrastructure. Its dynamics — including tribal mobilization and the targeting of entire communities — have severely torn Sudan's social fabric. These patterns, combined with food insecurity; widespread disease, epidemics, and human rights violations such as the use of sexual violence against women and girls as a weapon of war; the uncontrolled spread of arms; and the militarization of public life, have contributed to what the International Rescue Committee has described as the largest humanitarian crisis ever recorded.<sup>89</sup>

Public international law protects civic life and provides the basis for citizens to take part in the civic activities of one's country. It protects fundamental freedoms, shelters civilian actors from harm, and provides accountability for grave crimes under international law.<sup>10</sup> Under international humanitarian law, parties to conflict must distinguish civilians from combatants and protect civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, and civilian homes.<sup>11</sup> State actors also have a duty to allow humanitarian access.<sup>12</sup> International human rights law protects freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly<sup>13</sup> and guards against arrests, intimidation, and repression as well as forced displacement.<sup>14</sup> These protections remain in force during times of armed conflict and may only be restricted under exceptional circumstances.<sup>15</sup>

Despite their unfavorable environment, Sudanese civic actors remain a vital source of resilience, relief, and hope for a war-torn population. In the absence of a functioning state, they have played an essential yet undervalued role as they provide aid, organize evacuations, document abuses, and deliver psychosocial and legal support. Faced so directly with the impacts of conflict, civic actors have also been the most ardent advocates for peace and an immediate end to the war, even as most have lacked the advocacy platforms and necessary political clout to impact a context wholly dominated by armed

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<sup>7</sup> See Two years of war in Sudan: a devastating combination of record displacement and dwindling aid | UNHCR

<sup>8</sup> For more details on the extent of sexual violence in the war in Sudan see "They Raped All of Us": Sexual Violence Against Women and Girls in Sudan | Amnesty International USA"

<sup>9</sup> See Stories from Sudan: The largest humanitarian crisis on record | The IRC.

<sup>10</sup> Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998), Articles 5–8.

<sup>11</sup> Geneva Conventions of 1949, Common Article 3; Additional Protocol I (1977), Articles 48, 51, and 52; Additional Protocol II (1977), Articles 13 and 14.

<sup>12</sup> Geneva Conventions, Common Article 3; Additional Protocol II, Article 18(2).

<sup>13</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), 1966, Articles 19 (freedom of expression), 21 (peaceful assembly), and 22 (freedom of association).

<sup>14</sup> ICCPR, Articles 9 (freedom from arbitrary arrest), 12 (freedom of movement), and 7 (freedom from cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment); Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, Principles 6–9.

<sup>15</sup> ICCPR, Article 4 (derogations in states of emergency); U.N. Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 29: States of Emergency (Article 4), 2001.

actors. No stakeholder consulted viewed the war's end as imminent; rather, those who ventured to estimate a likely timeline anticipated a protracted conflict enduring for 10-15 years, an alarming prospect.

This critical community support role has extended beyond Sudan's borders, where some 4 million Sudanese have fled. Sudanese civic actors are recalibrating their work to respond appropriately to needs despite sometimes restrictive operating environments and regular legal ambiguity over their current operations. Many rely on informal networks, personal commitment, and limited resources to support displaced populations in these countries and grassroots operations inside Sudan.

While operating under extreme challenges, many civic actors continue to promote and seek participatory civilian governance and accountability for the litany of abuses committed by all sides of the conflict. Their actions are not only survival strategies but also expressions of resistance and determination to achieve their aspirations of building a civilian, democratic state, which was captured in the 2018 revolution's slogan: *Freedom, peace, and justice*. This report examines these challenges and how civic actors have adapted to the increasingly restrictive context in detail.

## Methodology

The Carter Center's international expert mission team conducted one-on-one and group interviews with a broad range of Sudanese civic actors and members of various organizations representing the diversity of Sudan. The aim was to better understand the challenges they face because of the war, how they have adapted, the support needed to sustain and expand their work, and their perspectives on international actors and donors.

This report draws on interviews and focus group discussions conducted by a six-member expert team, comprising individuals from diverse backgrounds and six countries, working in teams of two or more. The research covered 14 of Sudan's 18 states, as well as five countries across the region — Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Egypt and Chad, which collectively host millions of displaced Sudanese.

In total, 65 civic actors from civil society organizations, community-based groups, and voluntary initiatives were interviewed, alongside 17 others who participated in two in-person focus group discussions held in Egypt and Uganda. Focus group sessions lasted 2 to 2.5 hours. Participants across all engagements represented a diverse cross-section of Sudanese civil society: youth and women leaders, humanitarian responders, grassroots organizers, educators, peacebuilders, health professionals, human rights defenders, and representatives of both formal organizations and informal volunteer networks. They work across a range of sectors, including civic education, gender equality, digital advocacy, governance, transitional justice, and emergency response. Diaspora-based participants included individuals originally from all 18 of Sudan's states.

Most one-on-one interviews were conducted in person; however, 20 were held virtually with participants in Sudan and Ethiopia. Interviews were conducted in Arabic and English

and lasted an average of two hours each. In all cases, a Carter Center staff member moderated the discussion and another took notes. Interviews followed a semi-structured guide, and all participants gave verbal consent. Some interviews were recorded with permission to support data synthesis and analysis. Transcription of recorded interviews was carried out by a Carter Center staff member to maintain confidentiality. Names were not recorded or published.

The interviews explored the war's impact on Sudanese civil society and civic organizing; how actors have adapted their missions, operations, and strategies; and the legal, political, and operational challenges they face. Participants shared insights on funding, partnerships, resource needs, relocation dynamics, and their roles in a post-conflict Sudan, including priorities for justice, accountability, and governance.

Focus group discussions covered similar themes but emphasized collective perspectives. Topics included security risks (e.g., physical threats, legal restrictions, digital vulnerabilities), the use of social media, adaptation strategies, capacity-building needs, and civil society's role in future recovery and governance.

“Civic actors” are defined as individuals, initiatives, and organizations engaged in public-interest work outside the framework of armed, military, or state-affiliated institutions. This includes civil society organizations, volunteer networks, youth and women's initiatives, professional associations, community-based groups, media actors, legal aid providers, and grassroots entities that serve or protect civilian populations, such as emergency response rooms and mutual aid groups. While political parties are part of the broader civic landscape, this report focuses on nonpartisan civic actors, with an emphasis on humanitarian, advocacy, governance, human rights, and community-focused work.

This report uses the term “exile” not as a political classification but as a reflection of lived experience for those forcibly displaced beyond Sudan's borders. Although not all interviewed interlocutors in the diaspora are politically considered “exiled,” several shared that they feel cut off due to war, fear, and the uncertainty surrounding their safe return to their homes.

## Wartime Context for Civic Actors

Sudan's civil war has upended every aspect of civic life. Respondents described abrupt program suspensions, destroyed offices, looting of supplies and equipment, disbanded teams often with no way to reconnect easily, and sudden displacement. Communications were reduced to irregular messaging when network and security allowed, and planning became nearly impossible.

According to interlocutors, security threats have significantly escalated during the war. Public activities have become infeasible, forcing many civic actors to operate covertly or suspend their work entirely. Even in relatively calmer regions of Sudan, visibility often invites suspicion by local authorities. In the diaspora, actors reported continued fear of digital surveillance and online harassment from groups aligned with the warring parties. Host states also impose formal and informal restrictions, leading many to self-censor or

withdraw from public advocacy initiatives. Community civic actors reported that polarization between the two sides of the conflict has become common. In some cases, “choosing a side” is a practical, apolitical choice to facilitate access and continue serving people. In others, it reflects strong personal beliefs about Sudan’s history and the future of the country.

Despite this extremely volatile environment, civic actors remain central to humanitarian response, particularly in the absence of any meaningful response from the warring parties, both of which have been accused of using food and aid as a weapon of war.<sup>16</sup> In many areas, civic actors reported that they are the only ones coordinating and delivering aid, advocating for civilian protection, and maintaining contact with vulnerable communities. Most operate under extreme pressure, without funding, protection, or salaries to meet their own basic needs. Most respondents reported emotional exhaustion, including burnout, anxiety, and depression, and some mentioned survivor’s guilt. This strain is especially pronounced among those in the diaspora, where emotional fatigue is compounded by family separation, ongoing trauma, and prolonged uncertainty.

Some civil society organizations have managed to relocate to relatively safer areas in Sudan or abroad; according to activists, this was made possible by access to financial resources or personal connections, which are not available to most groups. Many civic actors resumed limited operations, despite legal, financial, and logistical constraints, underscoring the uneven impact of the war on Sudan’s civic ecosystem.

### ***Civic Infrastructure Has Proved Adaptive***

For 30 years under the rule of the National Congress Party and Omar al-Bashir, civil society and civic actors in Sudan were harassed, suppressed and weakened. In the wake of the 2018 revolution, however, particularly during the two-year transitional period from August 2019 until the October 2021 coup, civic actors made significant gains, reclaiming civic space, shaping political discourse, demanding accountability, and driving legal and social reforms.

Despite civil society fragmentation, a lack of funding, and vulnerabilities including continued state repression, this abbreviated era of Sudan’s transition was characterized by diversity, decentralization, and strong political engagement. War has reversed many of these gains. It has, however, also catalyzed new capacities, structures, and coordination mechanisms as civic actors have adapted and responded to Sudan’s new context. While respondents noted fragmentation, threats, and displacement and often hinted at unimaginable personal and communal loss, they also spoke of determination and hope for recovery and repair of their country’s social fabric and physical structures.

In the absence of sufficient and functioning formal CSOs, particularly in conflict-affected or peripheral regions of Sudan, many respondents described the emergence of informal civic structures as critical platforms for organizing, support, and survival. These included

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<sup>16</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2024, December 24). Famine Spreads in Sudan as Warring Parties Willfully Obstruct Aid; Al Jazeera. (2023, June 16). As Sudan War Rages, Rival Sides Accused of Looting, Diverting Aid; El País. (2024, April 15). Warring Sides in Sudan Have Weaponized Humanitarian Aid.

community support mechanisms, mutual aid networks, and, most notably, emergency response rooms, which have effectively served as default civic platforms in areas where formal institutions were absent, weak, or inaccessible. These informal structures are often staffed by young volunteers and coordinated through social media or personal relationships. Respondents repeatedly cited the rise of these ad hoc mechanisms as part of Sudan's new civic landscape, which is characterized less by formal registration and structured civic programming and more by flexibility, anonymity, and survival-oriented grassroots crisis response.

Respondents in both Sudan and the diaspora also described severe fragmentation of civic space. Logistical difficulties in coordination due to displacement, security risks, power and telecommunications blackouts, and political, ethnic, and tribal polarization were often cited as factors contributing to fragmentation. Communications and transportation breakdowns have significantly impacted the few networks that once coordinated across cities and states. As a result, civic engagement has become increasingly siloed along geographic, linguistic, ethnic, and social lines. Several respondents said that this will impact the coordination and coherence of civic efforts across Sudan over the long term.

## Challenges to Civic Action in Sudan and the Diaspora

The war has not only disrupted Sudan's civil society but also fundamentally reshaped the country's civic landscape. The actors who remain operational, whether inside Sudan or in the diaspora, are operating in a vastly different environment from what existed before the war. Their continued work reflects deep resilience and commitment but also exposes the fragility of civic life in the face of prolonged violence and institutional collapse.

Civic actors interviewed for this report — whether still operating inside Sudan or working from abroad — consistently described the landscape for civic engagement as increasingly challenging, constrained, and risky. While many challenges are shared, such as limited resources, legal restrictions, and personal risk, other conditions, including legal, operational, logistical, and security-related constraints, vary across geographies.

According to most respondents working in Sudan, the country's operating environment is not just restricted, it is endangered. Active fighting, the collapse of the rule of law and related protections, the fragmentation of authority, and widespread militarization were cited by most respondents as some of the challenges that heightened the daily risks civic actors face across Sudan.

At the same time, the civic space remains highly fragmented — divided by ideology, region, strategy, and unequal access to resources — negatively impacting coordination and trust. Yet many actors continue to express shared goals and a strong commitment to serving communities, pointing to potential for stronger cohesion and collaboration.

### ***Insecurity, Restrictions, and Operational Risks***

Civic actors inside Sudan testified to operating in a consistently hostile and unpredictable environment. Personal safety was the most-cited concern among the civic actors consulted,



who described being subject to threats, surveillance, arbitrary arrest, and, in some cases, detention and kidnapping. Others recounted the killing of colleagues by armed actors who made snap judgments about their loyalties. This risk was seen as particularly acute for those engaged in politically sensitive work and human rights and peacebuilding advocacy. However, because of the widespread weaponization of food aid in the conflict, it also extended to actors working on humanitarian relief and emergency response.

Both the SAF and the RSF were cited as sources of pressure, though the forms of control and reported violations varied by area. In SAF-controlled areas, civic actors reported being accused of collaborating with opposition forces, harassed by security services, or forced to implement some of their activities only in the presence of representatives from the Humanitarian Aid Commission or security and intelligence authorities. In RSF-controlled areas, civic actors were directed to obtain permission from newly established entities, such as the Sudanese Agency for Relief and Humanitarian Operations, which, since August 2023, regulates aid and civil society operations in the areas under RSF control. Failure to comply often resulted in operational restrictions or a complete shutdown. Representatives of organizations that were not registered reported that they continued to operate but experienced difficulties. On all sides of the conflict, neutrality was often interpreted by the warring sides as an unfavorable or hostile political position, contributing to the genuine or expedient polarization of many civic organizations.

### ***Legal and Administrative Obstacles***

Respondents described long delays and inconsistent, lengthy, and complicated procedures and requirements to obtain permits to operate, even for lifesaving humanitarian work. Respondents said their organizations were often subject to overlapping or contradictory requirements from SAF military intelligence, the HAC, or other local security actors. In some cases, civic groups were asked to revise their leadership or organizational structure to comply with shifting expectations, particularly in SAF-controlled territories. The region-by-region inconsistency of regulations in areas under armed control by the SAF or the RSF made compliance particularly challenging for civic actors, creating uncertainty, increasing operational risks, and restricting access to communities in need.

Several respondents reported that the HAC and SARHO or armed actors require the presence of an authority figure or security representative during their activities, such as aid distributions, workshops, and community consultations. While framed as a procedural safeguard, respondents reported this requirement as a form of surveillance and intimidation. In some cases, they said it discouraged beneficiaries from attending or participating freely. Others viewed it as an attempt to exert control over messaging, suppress potential criticism, or coerce civic actors to align with official narratives. Repeated monitoring pushed some groups to cancel activities or operate without formal permission to avoid unwanted attention and scrutiny.

The war has disrupted donor engagement and severely constrained the flow of funding to local civic actors. Inflation, currency devaluation, and the collapse of Sudan's formal banking systems have further limited access to available funds. Respondents reported a heavy reliance on the Bank of Khartoum mobile banking application Bankak to transfer

and receive funds. These factors have forced some civic groups to route resources through personal accounts to sustain even their most basic operations.

### ***Polarization and Division***

The war has deepened preexisting divisions within Sudanese society and within the civic sector itself. According to an overwhelming majority of respondents, ethnic, tribal, social, regional, and ideological polarization undermines trust and collaboration among groups. Some actors have aligned — formally or informally — with one side of the conflict or the other, while other groups are accused of doing so even when they are actively working to remain neutral. Respondents noted that even abstaining from a political position can be perceived as subversive. Cross-regional or cross-community trust, collaboration, and engagement have become increasingly difficult. Localized conflict dynamics and perceptions of alliances have disrupted already fragile partnerships and fostered mistrust.

Beyond broader societal divisions, the civic space itself is marked by multiple layers of fragmentation along ideological and regional lines, and individuals and groups also differ in vision, strategy and access to resources. This has complicated coordination, had a negative impact on trust, and limited the impact of collective efforts. Yet, despite these divisions, many civic actors continue to express shared priorities and strong commitment to serving affected communities, highlighting potential common ground for future collaboration.

### ***Disrupted Communications and Infrastructure***

Telecommunication blackouts, power outages, and destroyed infrastructure were consistently cited by interlocutors as major operational barriers inside Sudan. Many civic actors reported losing contact with their teams or beneficiaries for extended periods. Most respondents in RSF-controlled areas said they rely on satellite internet, namely Starlink, which is costly to use, because of the absence of coverage by traditional mobile operators. A few respondents in SAF-controlled areas reported secretly using Starlink, which is banned by the Port Sudan government, to maintain communication and coordinate aid despite the risks. The ban is inconsistently applied. The destruction of roads, transport routes, and logistical chains further limits the reach and effectiveness of civic work, particularly in remote or conflict-affected regions. According to most respondents, whether they have direct experience or not, moving food or other goods through much of Sudan now requires the payment of exorbitant fees to armed actors at checkpoints. Aid groups face denial of passage, roadblocks, and harassment by armed forces, unless permissions and payments are secured.

### ***Emotional and Psychological Strain***

The emotional toll of continuing civic work under strenuous conditions was emphasized across nearly all interviews. Most respondents face burnout, depression, trauma, and survivor's guilt, particularly those displaced from their homes or separated from their families. Many civic actors support communities while also experiencing personal loss, displacement, or trauma, often without access to mental health support or institutional

protection — underscoring an urgent need for both. This emotional burden was cited as one of the most pervasive and undersupported challenges civic actors face.

### **Working in the Diaspora: Uncertainty, Constraints, Fatigue**

Sudanese civic actors operating in the diaspora reported different, yet equally significant, challenges. While displacement may provide physical safety, nearly all respondents raised concerns about legal uncertainty, constrained civic space, financial hardship, and emotional strain, which they said deeply impact their ability to work effectively.

#### ***Displacement, Bureaucracy, and Instability***

Many civic actors fled Sudan with limited resources and arrived in neighboring countries with little knowledge of local legal or civic environments. Legal and administrative frameworks varied widely; some countries provided entry visas, registration and basic protection, while in other countries, respondents reported visa denials or long delays that blocked access to safety.

In some countries, Sudanese citizens were able to register organizations, open bank accounts, and access funding. Elsewhere, CSO registration was nearly impossible due to legal restrictions, political sensitivities, and excessive bureaucracy. Several respondents reported operating without formal legal status, which exposed them to potential legal risks, funding obstacles, and the threat of being shut down.

Even in relatively permissive settings, respondents reported that legal ambiguity remains a persistent issue. Most respondents said they would benefit from clear guidance on legal and administrative procedures, consistent rules, affordable fees, and expedited procedures. Some reported instances of intermediaries, initially hired to facilitate their work, exploiting their unfamiliarity with legal procedures and charging them for unnecessary services or stalling paperwork. Nascent or youth-led initiatives reported experiencing difficulties in this respect.

Many of the civic actors consulted said they were unable to conduct civic or public activities without prior notification or approval from security or local authorities in their new place of residence. This included workshops, community meetings or even commemorative events. Several respondents noted that activities framed around human rights or transitional justice, among other things, could be perceived as politically sensitive by host governments. In such environments, civic actors described operating quietly and informally, adopting “low-profile” strategies to avoid attracting unwanted attention.

#### ***Financial and Operational Obstacles***

Most diaspora-based actors reported distinct financial and operational challenges. Donor requirements for formal registration, detailed reporting systems or previous grant experience often exclude newer or unregistered initiatives from receiving support. Several respondents emphasized that while donor interest may exist, most funding mechanisms are not well adapted to the realities of civic organizing in the diaspora, as it often takes place in informal or legally ambiguous conditions. Some rely on small grants from diaspora

networks or personal savings and individual contributions to operate. This use of personal funds to maintain operations was a common theme and is a strong indicator of the commitment and dedication of civic actors. Personal financial pressure, including supporting family members inside Sudan, however, limits their ability to sustain voluntary civic work over the long term.

While a strong sense of solidarity often prevails among Sudanese actors in the diaspora, most respondents described fragmentation and informal hierarchies within the Sudanese diaspora civic space. Respondents frequently cited a small number of organizations or individuals as dominating access to coordination platforms, capacity-building opportunities or donor relationships. Newer actors, especially youth-led or regional groups, reported feelings of exclusion and frustration. Language barriers, the absence of structured coordination frameworks, and competition over limited resources mean collaboration is often difficult to achieve.

### ***Emotional and Psychological Fatigue***

Although diaspora civic actors no longer face the same daily physical risks experienced by their peers inside Sudan, many said they continue to bear a heavy emotional and psychological burden from the war. Several respondents described the weight of carrying on civic work while separated from colleagues, family, and communities affected by conflict. Feelings of helplessness, instances of survivor's guilt, or being perceived as "privileged" in safety were common, especially among those working with survivors of violence or maintaining contact with communities in active war zones. Despite these constraints, respondents rarely mentioned access to formal psychosocial support or peer counseling mechanisms in their host countries.

## **Adaptation, Resilience, and Institutional Endurance: Sustaining Civic Activities During Wartime**

Despite the extensive operational, political, and security challenges detailed above, Sudanese civic actors, both within Sudan and in the diaspora, have demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. This section explores how they have addressed these challenges through different mechanisms and approaches to maintain their roles and effectiveness during conflict and displacement.

### ***Shifting Mandates and Survival-Focused Interventions***

Civic organizations and actors in Sudan and the diaspora have made profound adjustments to sustain operations during the conflict. Many organizations were forced to suspend their programming or disband altogether in the war's early months. Most that remained active shifted their pre-war focus from conflict resolution, local peacebuilding, and inclusive development work to emergency relief efforts and survival-based interventions, for which demand was most acute and funding was most available. This work included food aid, self-defense training for women and girls, psychosocial support, health awareness-raising

campaigns, women's health initiatives, disease prevention, and the distribution of essential medical and hygiene supplies.

### ***Localized Service Delivery and Frontline Access Strategies***

The work of organizations with long-standing community engagement outside the capital (e.g., in Kassala, Blue Nile, and White Nile states) became increasingly vital as centralized civil society structures began to collapse. Youth- and women-led groups reported that they have grown in size and importance, often stepping in when established, institutionalized civil society organizations ceased operations or their essential staff fled. Many organizations have relocated and now operate from surrounding countries due to safety concerns, with a number forming cross-border partnerships. For example, some organizations, particularly those from Darfur or with a focus on conflict-affected regions, explained that they partner with Chadian organizations to reach RSF-controlled areas or displaced populations. Others reported that they have managed to work across the front lines. These respondents emphasized the importance of maintaining neutral relationships with both warring parties and ensuring that they are not perceived as favoring one side over the other in order to maintain community access. They reported that this proved to be extremely challenging as even neutrality could be perceived as partisan.

### ***Informal Governance and Volunteer Models***

Many actors said they rely on volunteer-based models, informal networks and local, informal governance structures to sustain operations and deliver services. They reported scaling down or suspending their programming entirely when donors pulled out or shifted their funding priorities. In response, Sudanese civic actors said they adopted flexible programming and innovative responses. Soup kitchens, community kitchens known as “takaya,” and community-driven aid continue to be lifelines for huge segments of the population.<sup>17</sup> In some regions in Sudan, some civic actors said they launched digital security awareness efforts and created hotlines for human rights defenders. Others said they turned to theater, music, and other forms of art to promote peacebuilding, coexistence and community healing, especially among youth, to counter the devastating impacts of hate speech and social fragmentation.

### ***Women-Led Adaptations to Civic Space Restrictions and Gender-Based Constraints***

Security risks and political sensitivities persist, continuing to shape how civic actors operate. As previously discussed, some respondents reported that they or their colleagues had been detained, targeted, or harassed by local authorities under suspicion of engaging in political activity or for making ransom demands. To mitigate these risks, many organizations said they use careful language, framing their initiatives with less politically sensitive terms to avoid potential retaliation. For example, a women-led group in Sudan that works on gender-based violence and trauma-healing for rape survivors reported framing their activities as part of a reproductive health initiative because it is less likely to attract notice from local authorities.

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<sup>17</sup> Soup kitchens in Sudan serve immediate needs while community kitchens additionally promote community involvement, self-reliance, and social interaction, including collective cooking and shared meals. The latter sometimes charge small amounts of money for a meal.

Despite severe limitations and challenges, women-led groups in some SAF-controlled areas, along with other respondents, reported continuing efforts on women's political participation, economic empowerment, and gender-based violence. These efforts often remain out of public view due to restrictions on gatherings and limited access to safe venues necessary to conduct activities. In the diaspora, some Sudanese women's groups are developing strategies to protest ongoing violence and political repression in Sudan. They use discreet coordination methods and decentralized leadership structures such as "trees" of responsibility, where roles and tasks are distributed across different individuals; this allows women's groups to organize securely. They have also adopted safe messaging techniques such as using coded language and symbols, visual messaging through art, and peer-to-peer information sharing, among other approaches, to amplify women's presence in civic spaces and public actions.

### ***Coordination, Partnerships, and Trust-Building***

Overall, Sudanese civil society organizations in Sudan and the diaspora remain eager to collaborate. Many reported that they continue to build local partnerships, particularly in service delivery. However, while several respondents said mistrust, lack of transparency, unequal donor access, and regional competition pose significant barriers to more meaningful coordination, the desire for collaboration remains strong. Sudanese CSOs and civic actors expressed a strong demand for neutral coordination platforms, training, and support for inclusive, equitable networks. Several respondents said many Sudanese groups are forming new alliances and partnerships and have begun collaborating with U.N. agencies, regional CSOs, and donors to secure funding, technical support, and humanitarian corridors. This networking has extended to regional and international platforms on specific themes such as women, peace and security and youth issues, thereby amplifying the voices of certain segments of the population as civic actors. In some cases, groups that had not previously received external support reported accessing funding or technical assistance for the first time after the war began through partnerships for health and food aid.

### ***Digital Adaptation and Social Media Use***

As physical space for civic activity has narrowed, Sudanese civic actors have increasingly turned to digital platforms — including Facebook, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram — for communication, coordination, and public outreach. These platforms have allowed actors inside and outside Sudan to document abuses, circulate alerts, raise emergency funds, and amplify civic initiatives where public organizing is difficult or no longer feasible.

## **Donors and International Actors: Lessons, Impact, and Opportunities**

Respondents across Sudan and the diaspora widely acknowledged the importance of international support and aid in sustaining civic work during the ongoing war. However, many emphasized that the structure, delivery, and sustainability of this support are as significant as its scale. Civic actors expressed frustration with donor fragmentation, inflexible procedures, and perceived inequities in funding distribution. In particular, they

frequently cited the suspension of U.S. government funding as a turning point that deepened uncertainty and disrupted ongoing initiatives. While most respondents recognized the political dynamics that prompted it, many perceived it as a withdrawal of international solidarity and support at a time of acute need. There was a clear call for more collaborative, context-sensitive partnerships that extend beyond short-term humanitarian response and support long-term civic resilience.

At the same time, many respondents acknowledged areas where international assistance has been effective and impactful. These included emergency relief efforts, such as the provision of food, medical supplies, and hygiene products, particularly in IDP camps, with organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières, Oxfam, CARE, and various U.N. agencies frequently cited for their contributions. Respondents also highlighted cases where international funding enabled the evacuation of survivors, delivery of psychosocial care, and legal support for victims of sexual violence. Nonetheless, they noted the inconsistency of such support across regions and the pressing need for expanded services and efforts to combat stigma. In addition, women- and youth-led civic actors emphasized the importance of regional and global platforms, supported by international donors, in elevating Sudanese civic perspectives and amplifying Sudanese actors' advocacy on the international stage.

### ***Impact of U.S. Aid Suspension and Broader Funding Implications***

The suspension of U.S. funding came as a significant shock to Sudanese civil society, a concern raised by all respondents. As the most significant humanitarian contributor in Sudan until late 2023, the U.S. government's abrupt halt of over \$700 million in aid greatly affected local organizations. For example, some of the soup kitchens that relied primarily or exclusively on U.S. government funding were forced to shut down following these cuts, leaving affected Sudanese civilians without access to what was often their only meal of the day, increasing the risk of famine.

Multiple civic actors in Sudan and neighboring countries said U.S. funds previously supported a range of essential activities, including emergency response, protection services, and rights-based programming. The suspension and sudden funding cuts led some organizations to freeze operations entirely. For example, a women-led group in South Kordofan reported halting a gender-based violence protection initiative midway, and a youth network operating in Kassala had to close a community health hotline that was providing psychosocial support to displaced families.

Most interviewees noted that the U.S. aid suspension triggered a ripple effect across other international donors, particularly those co-funding initiatives with U.S. agencies, resulting in a broad slowdown in funding that affected established organizations and newer, youth-led groups. Respondents reported suspending programs, reducing staff, and redirecting resources for survival. Some described being midway through their protection or livelihood interventions when their funding was withdrawn, which complicated their ability to fulfill commitments made to communities or staff. One diaspora-led initiative in Cairo described having to abandon a planned civic education program due to its full reliance on a now-defunct U.S.-backed grant. Another grassroots collective in Darfur reported they were unable to continue a mobile protection unit that had been reaching remote IDP camps.

While the impact was widespread, the extent of disruption varied. Smaller grassroots groups, especially those in remote areas or outside of international networks, were hit the hardest, due to their lack of diversified funding. In contrast, more established NGOs were better positioned to shift operations or restructure; however, most Sudanese civic actors reported having no safety net and were therefore unable to plan or transition smoothly.

Despite challenges, many respondents noted that some international support has remained effective, especially in emergency relief and humanitarian aid, protection, psychosocial support, and advocacy that highlights local perspectives. According to respondents, European donors and U.N. agencies have continued to fund protection services for vulnerable groups, including refugees, internally displaced persons, and women, as well as providing mental health support in certain parts of the country. Platforms like the women, peace, and security framework and youth-focused initiatives have allowed local youth organizations to raise their voices and advocate for peace and justice. In addition, international advocacy has helped draw attention to the ongoing crisis in Sudan. According to respondents, the effectiveness of this support may vary based on the security situation, geographical areas, and the shifting priorities of international donors.

### ***Opportunities for Increased Impact***

While acknowledging the efforts of donors and international actors, respondents also identified several structural and procedural challenges that hinder the impact of assistance. Several respondents in Sudan and the diaspora voiced concerns regarding what they perceived as the centralized, inflexible, and often exclusive nature of international aid. Many said international funding is predominantly channeled into conflict zones, despite critical unmet needs in other areas of the country and the region. They expressed frustration that donors typically employ predetermined and rigid strategies rather than adapting to the rapidly changing local context or community-defined priorities, leading to perceptions of misaligned interventions. Representatives of organizations in Sudan, particularly those involved in emergency work, reported being unable to meet the strict donor requirements. The slow, bureaucratic nature of donor processes often does not align with the urgency and fluidity of Sudan's crisis.

A primary issue highlighted by most respondents is that the current international funding approach concentrates mainly on emergency humanitarian responses such as food, medicine, and shelter while overlooking long-term recovery and resilience-building initiatives. Although they acknowledged the need to address immediate survival requirements, several respondents, especially from the diaspora, shared concern that this short-term focus could undermine Sudan's long-term stability and post-conflict recovery, which, in the long run, will require addressing the root causes of the war. They stressed that without ongoing international support for community resilience, civic rebuilding, and institutional recovery, emergency aid alone will be insufficient for Sudan's future.

In Sudan, many civic actors, especially those in humanitarian aid, reported inadequate capacity to meet complex donor requirements. The urgent nature of their work and the environment in which they operate allow little time for lengthy proposals or navigating



strict bureaucratic processes, effectively excluding them from many funding opportunities. This situation disproportionately impacts small, volunteer-led, or grassroots regional organizations that are relevant and trusted by their communities.

Respondents expressed frustration over the concentration of funding and partnerships among a few established CSOs while emerging, grassroots, youth-led, women-led, and regional organizations remain undersupported. Despite their strong local legitimacy, these groups face significant barriers to visibility and access, complicating their efforts to sustain or expand operations.

These disparities are also evident in capacity-building initiatives that, according to many respondents, often target a limited group of actors, leading to “overtrained elite organizations,” that are not necessarily able to implement on the ground. This risks donor frustrations about lack of impact. In contrast, newer or informal organizations, often closest to the communities they serve, remain inadequately capacitated, particularly in governance, program management, and financial systems. Adding to these challenges are issues of donor fragmentation and the lack of coordination and collaboration, and inadequate impact tracking and follow-up, which frequently leads to duplication, inequitable support, and even local tensions.

While respondents emphasized the need to broaden access and support for grassroots and emerging organizations, The Carter Center recognizes the challenges donors face in balancing broader inclusion with accountability, especially in vetting local partners and managing risks in a complex environment. Respondents recommended exploring more flexible, tiered funding models and partnership pathways that allow newer organizations to engage meaningfully while maintaining essential due diligence and performance standards.<sup>18</sup> Women’s rights activists have highlighted small, rapid-response funds, such as the African Women’s Development Fund, the Urgent Action Fund for Africa, Mama Cash, the Global Fund for Women, and the Black Feminist Fund, as particularly effective. Alongside these, Sudanese women-led organizations in Chad have praised the responsiveness and flexible support models of Finnish donors and U.S.-based African women-focused funding institutions, illustrating examples of adaptable and timely donor assistance.

In addition to these factors, respondents expressed concerns about the political marginalization of Sudanese civil society. They noted that peace negotiations and other initiatives are often led by elite organizations and prominent figures deemed worthy by the international community as “civilian actors” but who usually live abroad and may be detached from the Sudanese population and realities on the ground. Although these individuals may easily gain international endorsement and support, they often lack grassroots legitimacy, which should come from domestic communities instead of outside approval. Additionally, fragmentation within civil society along political, regional, ethnic,

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<sup>18</sup> Tiered funding structures offer donors a flexible way to support organizations based on their size, capacity, and context. This approach allows both established and grassroots groups to access funding, while still ensuring proper accountability and oversight.

tribal, or in some instances generational lines weakens civilian influence in peace negotiations and could have a potentially negative impact on a long-term representative transition.

## Critical Needs and Resources of CSOs in Sudan and the Diaspora

Throughout the interviews, Sudanese civic actors consistently highlighted the need for targeted, sustained support to enable their continued work. Respondents identified several critical needs to sustain their civic actions both inside Sudan and in the diaspora. These needs included: support for daily operational needs and communications, logistics and physical infrastructure, skills and capacity building, human resources and volunteer support, and institutional maintenance.

### *Internal Organizational Needs and Training*

According to a majority of respondents, access to core operational funding (for electricity, rent, transport, and internet) remains one of the most pressing needs. Emergency funds for rapid response and small stipends for volunteers who work under severe hardship were also flagged as urgent. Core financial support would enable existing organizations to continue their ongoing activities. For example, respondents from an organization in Northern State described struggling to secure even basic supplies like stationery tools, while respondents from an organization in North Darfur's Al-Fasher reported being unable to process external fund transfers due to financial lockouts.

Several respondents said that effective civic work and service delivery require access to basic tools, equipment, and facilities. Respondents described widespread shortages of supplies such as laptops, printers, projectors, and cameras. They also lacked safe modes of transport, meeting and training spaces, and secure storage spaces. For example, in Gedaref, respondents reported that they packaged dignity kits in private homes because they lacked an office. In Gezira, civic actors said they worked extensive periods without electricity, water, or functioning basic communication equipment. In North Kordofan, representatives working on humanitarian initiatives reported operating far from the hospital due to the lack of a nearby office. This logistical challenge is compounded by the region's strained health care infrastructure. Additionally, the rapid spread of diseases such as dengue fever, malaria, and cholera has overwhelmed existing health facilities, resulting in shortages of essential medical supplies and significant strain on health care personnel. These conditions highlight the critical need for better access to health care services and the establishment of operational hubs closer to affected communities. Several respondents also highlighted the need for field-specific tools. They cited the need for medical kits, hygiene supplies, dignity kits, psychosocial tools, as well as legal documentation templates, educational materials, and mobile teaching tools. Most respondents expressed interest in the accompanying professional development training, including in legal aid, psychosocial support, trauma healing, child protection, digital security, hostile environment awareness training, and emergency response.

Civic activists also highlighted internal gaps in project management, monitoring and evaluation expertise, financial management, and strategic planning. Representatives from

several organizations said they would also benefit from learning about the use of technology and social media for advocacy, organizing, and countering hate speech. They said these skills would enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of their efforts. Consistent with the findings mentioned earlier, several respondents stressed that, frequently, the training offered by international donors and organizations is concentrated among a few individuals and sometimes lacks effectiveness as it addresses donor agenda rather than the needs of the civic actors themselves. They also highlighted that qualified trainers who remain active in Sudan are scarce.

### ***Human Resources, Volunteer Support, and Connectivity***

Volunteers are the backbone of numerous Sudanese civil society organizations. Yet most work without pay, recognition, or resources. Respondents stressed the importance of providing small stipends, as well as mental health and leadership development support, particularly for marginalized or first-time group leaders. For example, a respondent in the Kordofan region noted that 12 out of 20 of their organization's team members are women — a significant achievement in the local context — but that most would benefit from training to boost their leadership capacity. Similarly, in Northern State, volunteers receive no support and lack venues for meetings, as well as basic necessities like beds and blankets, in areas where they volunteer to distribute aid overnight.

Digital communication remains essential for civic actors in conflict-affected and diaspora settings; however, access remains unequal, and several civic actors reported being disconnected for extended periods. Nearly all respondents described the need for phones, routers, power banks, solar charging tools, and satellite internet tools, which are banned in SAF-controlled areas and expensive in RSF-controlled regions. These items are essential for coordination, reporting, remote training, emergency alerts, data gathering, and documentation.

### ***Governance and Institutional Development***

Several respondents emphasized the need for support in establishing internal governance systems within civil society organizations to ensure accountability, effective decision-making, and standard operating procedures. Some cited legal and administrative training as necessary to ensure legitimacy as strong governance structures would help increase a CSO's credibility, effectiveness, and sustainability.

## **Visions for Return, Accountability, Healing, and Reconciliation**

Nearly all respondents in the diaspora said they desired to return to Sudan — not only to reunite with families or escape displacement, but to help rebuild the country and promote a future Sudan that embraces civilian rule and justice. Most indicated their interest in returning home even if a full transformation of Sudan has yet to occur. They described their wish, however, for an environment where they can work without fear and with dignity to make a meaningful impact. Under international public law, citizens have a right to take part in the civic affairs of their country.<sup>19</sup> While some actors outlined minimum conditions

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<sup>19</sup> International Covenant on Civic and Political Rights, Art. 25.

for an early return, others set broader expectations linked to Sudan's political transformation, civic space restoration, and social stability.

Respondents identified several conditions for a safe and voluntary return to Sudan, rooted in international principles of human rights and public international law, including, most importantly, the right to security of person.<sup>20</sup> These conditions include a real and sustained cessation of hostilities, not just a declared ceasefire. This is the most fundamental precondition for all interviewees living outside Sudan. A safe return also relies on access to essentials like health care, clean water, and food, which are core to the right to life and dignity.<sup>21</sup> Respondents also advocated for a civilian-led peace process, emphasizing that demobilization, disarmament, and broader societal demilitarization, along with the restoration of civilian control over public administration, are essential to democratic governance and lasting peace. They expressed skepticism toward elite-driven agreements between the SAF and RSF, warning that such agreements could replicate past authoritarian rule and marginalize civilians.

### ***The Threshold Conditions for Returning to Sudan Are High***

The need that respondents cited most frequently was a sustained end to active fighting. While most did not necessarily precondition their return on a full political agreement, they emphasized that they could not return while cities remain battlegrounds and bombings and ground offensives are ongoing. The key concern was not a formal announcement, but a real, observable cessation of hostilities on the ground.

Most respondents also said their fear today is greater than at any point in their civic lives, including under the regime of Omar al-Bashir or after the 2021 coup. Many refugees said they would not go home without guarantees against harassment, surveillance, arrest, attack, or even death for their work. Respondents expressed this fear regardless of region or authority structure.

Most respondents noted that there has been a rise in extrajudicial killings and reprisal attacks, widespread hate speech, public incitement, and unchecked impunity, creating an environment where civic actors are directly targeted. This shift makes it difficult for them to imagine operating safely without risking serious harm. They emphasized that without real guarantees, their return would be neither responsible nor sustainable.

### ***A Political or Peace Process Toward Civilian Rule Is Needed***

Most respondents said a ceasefire is a necessary first step, but many stressed that it alone would not create safe conditions for return. They called for a credible political process that could end the fighting and establish a peace agreement with meaningful civilian participation.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, Art. 9.

<sup>21</sup> Under International Human Rights Law (ICESCR Articles 11 and 12), everyone has the right to an adequate standard of living and the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

There was strong skepticism toward any settlement negotiated solely between the SAF and RSF. Some feared that the two forces could eventually reconcile and form a ruling system akin to the former Transitional Sovereignty Council. Several referenced the October 2021 coup — jointly executed by SAF and RSF — as evidence that civilians could again be sidelined under the guise of peace.

For many, genuine change requires involving civic actors and other civilian stakeholders from the beginning. Several emphasized that international actors should not legitimize agreements made only by armed factions but rather actively promote the inclusion of pro-democracy civilian forces advocating for a just transition.

### ***Demilitarization of Civic and Public Life and Restoration of Basic Services***

Some respondents emphasized that even if the front lines shift, the continued militarization of everyday life hinders their work. The presence of armed forces in public institutions, their control over humanitarian distribution, and heavy surveillance of civic spaces inhibit safe civic engagement. Respondents urged a shift from rule by arms toward the restoration of civilian authority in public spaces and services.

Several respondents stressed that safety and political space alone are insufficient, and that return is unfeasible without basic living conditions. The lack of functioning hospitals, electricity, clean water, transport, and essential goods like fuel and food is a significant barrier. For those with families or health needs, the absence of basic services poses real safety risks.

Many interviewees expressed willingness to return and help restore services and emphasized that this cannot happen in a vacuum. The state must demonstrate its readiness by enabling access to services and allowing humanitarian and international actors to assist in rehabilitating infrastructure and supply chains. Partial restoration — such as reopening clinics or schools — would signal stabilization and a green light for return.

Respondents noted that civic actors have long contributed to service delivery and local governance, addressing gaps left by absent institutions. That role has grown since the war began, with civic groups effectively coordinating relief and managing community responses.

## **Key Conclusions**

Now in its third year, Sudan's conflict continues to affect the operational landscape for CSOs and civic actors. In response to shifting conditions, civic actors have adjusted their focus from long-term objectives such as democratic reform and transitional justice to immediate priorities, including humanitarian assistance and crisis mitigation. This change reflects both pressing community needs on the ground and the increasingly restricted operating environment marked by security threats and resource constraints.

Despite widespread damage to infrastructure and the erosion of public services, civic engagement remains active. Most efforts are conducted through informal networks and

volunteer contributions, often without access to formal organizational infrastructure or sustainable funding. Activities range from localized psychosocial support and essential service distribution to cross-border coordination with community partners. These efforts underscore the continuing relevance and adaptability of civil society actors in meeting immediate needs, even in the absence of institutional support.

Women- and youth-led initiatives have taken on expanded roles, particularly in areas where state systems are inactive or absent. However, these actors frequently lack access to financial and technical resources and remain largely excluded from formal decision-making processes, particularly outside of Khartoum. While some organizations have received support from regional and feminist funding sources, overall support has diminished due to suspension of U.S. assistance and the fragmentation of international donor engagement. The European Union and certain U.N. agencies have partially filled this gap, contributing to short-term sectoral stability. Nonetheless, additional support, particularly from bilateral donors and private foundations, is needed to ensure continuity and prevent further degradation of civic capacity and efforts.

The Sudanese diaspora also plays an increasingly important role in supporting civic efforts. Overseas activists continue to mobilize financial and technical resources, document rights violations, and engage in international advocacy. While many express interest in contributing to recovery efforts inside Sudan, current conditions do not support voluntary return or secure reentry for many of these individuals.

Across all contexts, civic actors share a continued focus on community service delivery and long-term national recovery. While they are actively operating under suboptimal conditions, they consistently emphasize the need for support that extends beyond financial assistance. Technical capacity, political engagement, and physical protection are necessary to enable their work, maintain operations, and prepare for future recovery. Personal safety and a minimum degree of civic freedom remain essential for them to operate effectively, return home, and contribute to recovery and reform.

Looking ahead, a sustainable approach to supporting Sudanese civil society requires acknowledgement of several key structural conditions:

1. Sustained operational support. Sudanese civic organizations require flexible and predictable funding to maintain functionality. This includes operational costs, capacity development, digital access, mental health services, and protective measures. Access to basic infrastructure, such as electricity, internet connectivity, and secure communication platforms, is also essential for continuity of engagement.
2. Comprehensive security conditions. A reduction in violence must go beyond ceasefire declarations. Security for civic actors depends on the broader process of demilitarization, restoration of civilian oversight, and enforceable safeguards against surveillance, harassment, and reprisal. Without such protections, civic space will remain constrained.

3. Inclusive political participation. Sustainable peace processes require the direct involvement of diverse civic stakeholders. Exclusion of grassroots groups, particularly those representing women, youth, displaced persons, and marginalized groups, risks perpetuating the same patterns of elite control and marginalization that have contributed to ongoing instability.
4. Adjusted international engagement. External actors should revise their approach to supporting Sudanese civil society. Civic actors seek structured partnerships that are equitable, context-specific, and accessible across a range of organizations. Prioritizing local ownership, flexible funding mechanisms, and recognition of civil society's dual role in emergency response and democratic transition is critical for long-term impact.

At present, Sudanese civil society remains active and committed but remains increasingly vulnerable to both material and institutional erosion. Despite limited resources and ongoing security challenges, civic actors maintain their presence and contribute meaningfully to both immediate relief and broader recovery efforts. To maintain and strengthen this capacity, donors, multilateral institutions, and international partners should pursue coordinated, long-term strategies grounded in democratic values and rights-based frameworks.

Without such support, the deterioration of civic space may become irreversible. With targeted and sustained investment, however, civil society actors can continue to play a central role in humanitarian response, institutional recovery, and the advancement of inclusive governance.

The following recommendations propose concrete steps to support this objective.

## Key Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the priorities and concerns shared by Sudanese civic actors inside the country and in the diaspora. While needs vary by context, one message was clear: Civic actors are working under extreme conditions and urgently need safety, space, and coordinated support to continue their work.

- **Include civic actors in all political and peace processes.** Respondents consistently advocated for the inclusion of nonpartisan civilian voices, including women and youth, in any ceasefire, peace agreement, or political negotiation. Historical agreements that excluded civilian voices and concentrated solely on armed actors have directly contributed to the recurrence of conflict in Sudan. International stakeholders should convey to the warring parties that the inclusion of nonpartisan civilians is a prerequisite for any meaningful political discourse.
- **Balance emergency relief with long-term recovery, development, and the restoration of essential services.** Humanitarian assistance must be delivered in conjunction with sustained investments in long-term civic, developmental, and

recovery initiatives. Support should not only address urgent needs, such as food and shelter, but also rebuild essential services, including health, education, water infrastructure, and economic systems, in a manner that upholds dignity and reduces dependency. These efforts must be coordinated with civic engagement and political dialogue, acknowledging the protective and transformative roles of civic actors. Donors should invest in participatory governance, human rights monitoring, peacebuilding, social cohesion, and the development of locally led transitional justice mechanisms. Together, these elements lay the foundation for sustainable recovery, long-term stability, and the meaningful return and participation of Sudanese civic actors.

- **Co-create and invest in capacity-building priorities identified by Sudanese civic actors themselves.** Civic actors have highlighted crucial training requirements such as psychosocial support, digital and physical security, financial management, documentation of violations, and remote coordination. Donors and implementers should work collaboratively with local partners to design these programs, reflecting operational realities and grassroots priorities.
- **Broaden access to training, funding, and opportunities beyond the usual recipients.** There exists an urgent need to diversify aid and support beyond a narrow group of established actors. Emerging and localized organizations often remain excluded from opportunities. Donors and international nongovernmental organizations should ensure inclusion across geographical areas, demographics, and levels of experience.
- **Address the mental health needs of civic actors and frontline workers.** Civic actors assisting survivors and vulnerable communities encounter significant levels of trauma and burnout. Mental health and psychosocial support should be integrated into all civic programming and regarded as vital for organizational sustainability.
- **Shift from top-down to bottom-up approaches.** Donor strategies should be grounded in local needs assessments, particularly in both conflict and nonconflict zones hosting displaced populations. Donors should relax procedural requirements in fragile environments and foster relationships with credible local intermediaries.
- **Expand collaborations beyond a limited set of civil society organizations.** International donors should establish a comprehensive mapping of civil society actors across Sudan and the diaspora, with an emphasis on youth-led, women-led, and regional groups that are locally trusted yet often overlooked. Rather than issuing large grants to a select few organizations, smaller, more widespread grants should be distributed more equitably to cultivate a more inclusive civic space.
- **Invest in tailored, equitable capacity-building for new and informal organizations.** Training should encompass project and financial management, governance, and sustainability. Governance structures must be established to ensure that capacity-building opportunities are equitably allocated and not monopolized by a limited number of organizations.



- **Streamline and coordinate donor efforts.** Donors should simplify grant procedures, enhance coordination platforms, and adopt responsive funding models to support unregistered or informal civic actors. Positive models cited by respondents include the Pact model, the National Endowment for Democracy's flexible approach, and the adaptability of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Women's rights activists have also highlighted small, rapid-response funds, such as the African Women's Development Fund, the Urgent Action Fund for Africa, Mama Cash, the Global Fund for Women, and the Black Feminist Fund, as particularly effective.
- **Mandate collaborative planning and shared accountability.** Donors should require that collaborative planning occurs with local stakeholders during proposal development and the co-design of monitoring and accountability mechanisms to enhance transparency and local ownership.
- **Give Sudanese civil society a central role in peace processes and transitions.** Civil society must serve as active, equal partners in peacebuilding, particularly grassroots CSOs that represent youth, women, displaced communities, and conflict victims. Their profound understanding of local dynamics is critical in fostering lasting peace.
- **Increase funding for Sudanese civic actors.** The cessation of U.S. funding has created a significant gap. The international community should address this gap with predictable, flexible, and multiyear funding to Sudanese organizations, particularly for small and mid-sized civil society organizations. Donors should also consider steps to facilitate funding for informal or unregistered entities, which may have limited or no previous access to international financing. Localization and mutual aid initiatives should be prioritized, as they have demonstrated greater effectiveness and adaptability compared to more rigid or risk-averse models.
- **Bridge civilian divides and support coalition-building.** Sudan's civilian movement must encompass broad-based, representative organizing, especially in marginalized and war-affected regions. International actors can facilitate consensus-building by promoting inclusive dialogue among diverse civic actors, thus reducing fragmentation and partisanship.